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THE FIRST NEGOTIATIONS FOR RECIPROCITY IN NORTH AMERICA

The beginning of negotiations between the nations of North America for reciprocal trading concessions is generally associated with the overtures which resulted in the Reciprocity Treaty of 1854. The practical politician has had no predilection for ancient history; the economist has made no attempt to carry his study farther than this pact; but the searchlight of the historian's investigations, while playing on the old colonial documents, has revealed the fact that a little over two hundred years before this agreement was signed negotiations were entered into, looking to some measure of commercial intercourse between New France and New England, although neither country was far removed from the pioneer stage of development. In the light of the present controversy, perhaps a few moments' reflection on this early foreshadowing of the demand for freer trade relations on this continent will be of interest.

In 1647, at the instigation of John Winthrop, governor of Massachusetts, letters were sent from the people of New England to the French colony, proposing mutual trade relations, under certain restrictions, and, if we can trust the account given by Charlevoix, the clerical historian of New France, a little later an English envoy arrived at Quebec, much to the surprise of the *habitants*, "sent to propose a perpetual alliance between the two colonies independent of any rupture that might ensue between the two crowns."¹

The exact nature of the trade agreement desired is not known, nor is it easy to conceive of any satisfactory agreement between the two colonies. New France, at this time, exported little but furs, and up till 1645 the trade in these had been practically monopolized by the Company of One Hundred Associates. While England, through the mediation of the New England colonies, would have proved a profitable market for beaver

¹ Rev. P. F. X. de Charlevoix, *History and General Description of New France* (transl. by Dr. J. G. Shea) (New York, 1900), II, 213.

skins, the French market still maintained an active demand and showed no symptoms of the glut which later threw the whole trade into confusion and was responsible for such strange expedients as the burning of three-quarters of the supply of beaver skins, and the resort to legislation to compel all hatters to put at least three ounces of genuine beaver into each hat.² Any diversion of this trade would have met with strenuous opposition in France, and would, undoubtedly, have been vetoed by the King at the instigation of Cardinal Richelieu. On the other hand, despite the boasted freedom of the New England colonies in the conduct of their own affairs, the mother country would never have consented to the importation of French wines by way of Canada. Although considerable smuggling was carried on, with the aid of the Indians and the *coureurs de bois*, in order to secure the better prices offered for furs by the New England market, such trade had been strictly prohibited, under heavy penalties, and any attempt to establish trade relations between the two colonies must certainly have been without the sanction of the Crowns of either England or France. Prospects of a profitable trade in furs along the St. Lawrence River was probably the explanation of New England's advances.

We are told that the French professed to be greatly pleased with the proposal.³ Be this as it may, no action was taken at the time. The Chevalier de Montmagny returned to France in 1648, and Louis d'Ailleboust became governor. The French colony found more pressing demands on its consideration, in connection with the establishment of a new Council, pursuant to the colony's first constitutional charter of 1647.⁴ Correspondence was carried on for a time, but with the death of Governor Winthrop in March, 1649, the project appears to have been dropped.

But the northern colony soon had occasion to seek the assistance of its southern neighbor. The Iroquois were again on the war-path, waging a campaign of merciless extermination of

² Francis Parkman, *The Old Régime in Canada* (Boston, 1890), 308.

³ Hutchinson, *The History of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay* . . . (Boston, 1764), I, 166-67.

⁴ Rev. P. F. X. de Charlevoix, *op. cit.*, II., 205, footnote.

the other tribes—a campaign which had been threatened in 1648.⁵ Under these circumstances, Governor d'Ailleboust sent Father Druillettes—a missionary to the Indians, and a man whose executive ability was surpassed only by his devotion to his life's work—to Boston to secure, if possible, the co-operation of the English in a war against the common enemy, and in defense of the friendly tribes.

The Jesuit Father left Quebec on September 1, 1650, fully equipped for the journey, and accompanied by a faithful Indian chief, one of the Sillery Christians.⁶ Credentials to the New England authorities were his only passports. At Coussinoc (Augusta), the nearest English settlement, the travelers met John Winslow, brother of the colonial agent in England. Winslow, too, had been zealous in his labors for the conversion of the savages, and out of love and respect for the "Patriarch," the name by which Druillettes was known in this district, he volunteered to accompany him and his red companion to Boston. After the Indian chief had, with the customary ceremony, presented the agent of the settlement with a bundle of beaver skins, the little party set out for the capital of Massachusetts. After a tedious journey, during which the Frenchman was under suspicion of the English fishermen as being a Catholic spy, they reached Boston on December 8. Druillettes was at once introduced to Major-General Gebin (Gibbons), who extended to him the hospitality of his home, and the following day presented him to the Governor.

On December 13 the proposal for the alliance was debated in secret session by the magistrates of the city. Druillettes, however, had represented himself as having a twofold commission—"to wit, in the name of Monsieur the Governor of New France, at Kebec; and separately in the name of the Savages, both the Christians and the Akenebek Catechumens. . . ."⁷ As

⁵ James Douglas, *Old France in the New World* (Cleveland [and London], 1906), 305.

Narré du Voyage fait pour la Mission des Abnakiens et des connaissances tirées de la Nouvelle Angleterre et des dispositions des Magistrats de cette République pour le secours contre les Iroquois. Le tout par moi Gabriel Druillette de la Compagnie de Jésus, in *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* (Cleveland, 1899), XXXVI, 82-110.

⁷ *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, XXXVI, 81.

ambassador in this latter capacity, he was informed that it would be necessary to see the council of the colony at Plymouth, as the Kennebec was under its jurisdiction. Thither he went, and, as the priest himself tells us, "the governor of the place, named John Brentford, received me with courtesy, and appointed me an audience for the next day; and he invited me to a dinner of fish, which he prepared on my account, knowing that it was Friday."⁸

Action, however, must needs be taken by the four states of the New England Confederacy. Druillettes did what he could to insure a favorable decision, and, after writing a number of letters to persons who, he thought, would have an influence in the final judgment, he started on his return trip.

Although in the formal instructions to Father Druillettes there seems to have been no mention of a commercial treaty, it cannot be doubted that the prospect of such an agreement was held out as an inducement to the New England colonies. In a letter to John Winthrop, the Jesuit tells him:

Our Most Illustrious Governor of Kebec commanded me to offer you in his name the most ample Commercial advantages, and considerable compensation for the expenses of the war, in order to obtain from New England some Auxiliary troops for the defense of the Christian Cannadians [*sic*] (which he has already begun against the Moaghos⁹), and which through his affection for the Christian Savages he wishes to promote, at the same time and by the same undertaking, in favor of the Akenebek Catechumens, their allies, who are Inhabitants of New England, and the special clients of Plymouth Colony.¹⁰

That Druillettes was confident of the success of his mission is shown by his optimistic "Reflexions touchant ce qu'on peut esperer de la Nouvelle Angleterre contre l'Iroquois,"¹¹ appended to the story of his New England tour.

Father Druillettes reached Quebec at the beginning of June, 1651, and about a fortnight later he was sent back, with another deputy, on an errand similar to that from which he had just

⁸ *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, XXXVI, 91.

⁹ I.e., the Mohawks.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 104-11.

returned.¹² The ambassadors were intrusted with a letter to the commissioners of New England asking for their assistance against the Iroquois.¹³ Even if the English would not join in the war, it was asked that the French be given permission to enlist volunteers, or at least that they be allowed to pass through the English colonies as occasion might require. In return the envoys were authorized to agree upon a treaty granting to the people of New England the trading privileges they desired in their letters of the year 1647. The French, however, absolutely refused to proceed with a commercial treaty until the matter of co-operation against the Iroquois had been settled.

After weighing the proposals, the commissioners returned an unfavorable reply. During a war which the colonists had waged against the Pequod tribe, fourteen or sixteen years before, the Iroquois had remained neutral, and the English wisely refused to make war, without provocation, upon a powerful tribe, which generally had been friendly. As to granting passage through English colonies, it was pointed out that the most direct route to the Iroquois country was another way. So far as the proposal for a commercial treaty was concerned, the answer of the commissioners was as follows:

That the commissioners conceived the French deputies might proceed to settle a trade; but if they thought proper to limit it under such restrictions a fitter season for these treaties must be attended, which the commissioners would readily improve whensoever it presented.¹⁴

The prospect of a reciprocal trade agreement was undoubtedly held out as a bait to the English colonies. But the French had over-reached themselves, and it is not surprising that the English refused to incur the hostility of the Iroquois, and to endanger their own plantations in order to obtain a paper treaty with the French colony—a treaty which, in all probability, would have been vetoed by the royal authorities.

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¹² *Ibid.*, 227. It is interesting to note that during both these expeditions Druillettes was exposed to arrest as a Jesuit, as provided by the laws of the New England colonies.

¹³ Rev. P. F. X. de Charlevoix, *op. cit.*, II, 214-15.

¹⁴ Hutchinson, *op. cit.*, 166-71.